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ABSTRACT

Issues related to inclusion of African-American males into educational programs have continued to spark multidimensional political debates. It is apparent that African-Americans and other minorities are ill-prepared to attain their educational goals in the current state of affairs. Consequently, African-American males are underrepresented in gifted programs and overrepresented in special education classes. Unless strategies are prescribed and put into practice, the trend will likely accelerate in the 21st century. Educational reforms have failed to ameliorate academic problems confronting African-American males. This paper proposes a "Comprehensive Support Model" to foster the educational success of African-American males in the 21st century. This model calls for active support and commitment of African-American males themselves, their families and communities, the educational and school systems, and society at large. (Contains 28 references.) (Author)

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The Politics of Education: Imperatives for African-American Males in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Issues related to inclusion of African-American males into educational programs have continued to spark multidimensional political debates. It is apparent that African-Americans and other minorities are ill- prepared to attain their educational goals in the current state of affairs. Consequently, African-American males are underrepresented in gifted programs and overrepresented in special education classes. Unless strategies are prescribed and put into practice, the trend will likely accelerate in the 21st century. Educational reforms have failed to ameliorate academic problems confronting African-American males. This paper proposes a "Comprehensive Support Model" to foster the educational success of African-American males in the 21st century. This model calls for active support and commitment of African-American males themselves, their families and communities, the educational and school systems and the society at large.

The Politics of Education:
Imperatives for African-American Males in the 21st Century

African-American males face multidimensional problems in school programs. These problems range from insensitivity to outright exclusion. Today, issues related to full inclusion have sparked socio-political debates. Both public and private schools have been continually challenged to respond to individual and collective growth through legislation and litigation. Many laws have been instituted to address discriminatory exclusionary policies that have tended to masquerade educational programs. To some, these regulations are of great necessity. To others, they have negative impact on the self-identity of African Americans and manifest reversed discrimination on White Americans. These debates will be more intense in the 21st century.

Recent reform packages have had widespread political implications (Cuban, 1990). These packages have tended to downplay the fact that few minorities (e.g. African-American males) are represented in gifted programs, and majority of these minorities are overrepresented in special education classes (Artiles & Trent, 1994). This dangerous phenomenon leads one to ask two important questions. What can be done to include African-Americans in educational mainstream of the United States? What role should everyone (Whites and African-Americans) play in

the education of African-American males? This paper will respond to these questions and present perspectives for African-American males in the 21st Century. A "Comprehensive Support Model" is proposed by the authors as the most viable strategy for the 21st century.

Revisiting History

American education is traditionally class-oriented. The Quakers of Pennsylvania opened rooms for the education of the culturally different in America. This spirit was far from reach in the South where the "slave master" mentality was the dominant force of its status quo. As Cole (1983) pointed out, "the struggle to obtain equal access to quality education for Black Americans has been long and arduous" (p. 246). The struggle has stimulated a constant search for identity and freedom through advocacy, litigation and legislation. Despite these efforts to provide equitable education, problems linked to race, gender and class continue to haunt today's school programs. According to Staples (1984), "the ideology of equal opportunity masks the reality of a country stratified along racial, gender and class lines" (p.2). He criticized what he called the <u>new racism</u> which (a) tends to deny the existence of racism or the responsibility for it, (b) opposes quotas and affirmative action regulations, (c) calls for reductions in welfare, food stamps and public housing that some minorities rely

on, (d) defends phony meritocracy, and (e) relies on standardized tests that are not valid predictor variables of quality performance. Staples' assertion has been supported by other scholars (Aramburo, 1989; Arciniega, 1986; Ogbu, 1987, 1988; Richardson, 1989).

African-American scholars have not altogether agreed on how African-Americans can excel in the educational mainstream of America. For instance, Booker T. Washington (1938) wanted the African-American community to be instrumental in its self-determination and self-survival. He subscribed to the philosophy of moral and economic "uplift" through work. On the other hand, W.E.B. Dubois (1961) wanted the White dominant society to accept the total blame of the poor education or miseducation of African-Americans in America. Apparently, Dubois and Washington (both African-American males) disagreed on how equity and quality in the education of African-Americans can be achieved. This disagreement is apparent among minority scholars and educators of today. Affirmative action policies have generated more controversy. To some scholars (e.g. Loury, 1985), these policies have enhanced mediocrity, quotas and portrayed all African-Americans and other minorities as incompetent and unqualified individuals. To other scholars (e.g. Staples, 1984), affirmative action policies enhance equanimity and equity in institutions which have historically ignored

recruiting, and retaining African-Americans and other minorities. These scholars maintain that the simplistic view that affirmative action policies degenerate excellence is racist, and is a camouflage for maintaining the dominant status quo.

Education or Miseducation?

There has been the raging debate on whether the traditional aims of education (e.g. intellectual, social and emotional developments) have been geared towards the education of the masses. To many scholars (Dewey, 1958; Du Bois, 1961; Goodlad, 1979; Obiakor, 1993a; Staples, 1984; and Woodson, 1933), these aims have been "half-baked cakes." It is very apparent today that some educators have failed to understand the correlation between education and democracy. In his book, Philosophy of Education, Dewey (1958) affirmed:

> Education must have a tendency, if it is education, to form attitudes. The tendency to form attitudes which will express themselves in intelligent social action is something very different from indoctrination...There is an intermediary between aimless education and the education of inculcation and indoctrination. The alternative is the kind of education that connects the materials and methods by which knowledge is acquired with a sense of how things are done; not by impregnating the individual with some final philosophy, whether it comes from Karl Marx or from Mussolini or Hitler or anybody else, but by enabling him to so understand existing conditions that an attitude of intelligent action will follow from social understanding. (p. 56)

Dewey's concept of the educational process is

corroborated by the cognitive discovery learning theory of Bruner (1960). This theory assumes that learning is an active process in which the learner constructs personal meanings from the knowledge being interacted with, irrespective of the intended meanings of the instructor or source of knowledge. This approach would transform education into an agent for empowering African-American males to seek creative ways of contributing to social knowledge and shun the indoctrination of dominant philosophies and attitudes. To Dewey and Bruner, education must help the student develop as a whole person. Goodlad (1979) also underscored the need for comprehensive educational goals. In his book, What are the schools for?, he identified the major goals of American schools which are not just limited to intellectual development. These goals include self-concept, citizenship and self-realization for survival in the society at large. It is interesting to note that challenges posed by these scholars are no different from those posed by DuBois (1961), Staples (1984); Woodson (1933) and other African-American scholars who believe in multicultural education. In other words, the educational system has been excluding African-American males both in terms of personnel, curriculum content and instruction. The question is, Can we allow this exclusion and/or miseducation to continue in the 21st century?

Tradition Versus Reality

As we approach the 21st Century, it is imperative that strategic steps be taken to assist African-American males. Although education is the only route out of the ghetto or poverty for African-American males, their access to education is shrouded in politics. Artiles and Trent (1994) reported a study by Dunn which indicated that the "socio-culturally deprived" student in the U.S. has been defined as the child that came "from poverty, broken and inadequate homes, and low status ethnic groups" (p.411). This is a disturbing phenomenon, especially since "poverty" is equated with "poor intelligence."

Obiakor (1993a) noted that socio-economic dissonance has been used in the identification, assessment, placement and instruction of African-American students. The mythical and unproductive use of socio-economic dissonance by, sometimes well intentioned educators and practitioners has led many African-American students to internalize and practicalize the negative consequences of the "self-fulfilling prophesy." Not only has the government failed to traditionally combat "poverty" (Hill, 1989), it has not challenged practitioners to stop relying on "deficit" assumptions (Obiakor, 1992, 1993a). The question is, Can a poor child of a single parent household, living in the housing project experience

school success?

Teachers in most inner-city schools live in different environments and belong to the middle class. In most cases, these teachers have different values, cultures and symbols. A logical extension is that "poverty" and cultural values of African-American students are seen as deficits rather than as strengths. According to the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE, 1988), Whites represent 71.2% of the children in public schools and 89.6% of the teachers; in contrary, African-Americans represent 16.25% of all public school children, but only 6.95% of the teachers. Consider the following cases (Obiakor, 1993a) as examples of problems, though serious, that can be easily dealt with by good teachers and school programs. Obiakor wrote:

Case #1 I visited an inner-city elementary school to see my student teacher. I was fortunate to meet the principal of the school (a white-female) who started telling me that all her students came from "poor" homes; and that they never did well in school because their parents did not have jobs. During our conversation, she told me that she lived in the suburb and that she drove sixty miles every day to and from school.

Case #2 I visited an inner-city high school to observe my student-teacher. In my conversation with the cooperating teacher (a White-male), he told me that his students are "poor" and that many of them were drug-dealers who would either not succeed in life or would die before they became adults. When I asked him about solutions to help them, he laughed and indicated that it was difficult to flog a dead

horse.

Case #3 I visited my student-teacher in a resource room in one of the inner-city elementary schools. The cooperating teacher was an African-American female with an Educational Specialist (Ed.S) degree in Special Education. During my conversation with her, she proceeded to tell me that many of her students are criminals. She particularly pointed out one of her students -- she told me that the student had broken into cars many times and the student's mother was a prostitute. When I asked her why she was telling me this awful story, she noted that everybody knows.

Case #4 I visited an inner-city elementary school to continue my program, Project Self-Responsibility, which I initiated to help retain and graduate African-American students. The principal (an African-American male) was very nonchalant. He explained that the reasons for his skepticism are (a) these students were jail-birds who came from "poor" homes, and (b) these students' parents did not have jobs. In our conversation, he indicated that these students were beyond redemption. (p.5)

The problems of Afican-Americans identified above might seem unthinkable; however, they do not end at elementary and high scchool levels. Infact, they continue at college and university levels. Dr. James Conant (1936), then President of Harvard University indicated the significance of a university when he emphasized:

> What is a university? Like any living thing, an academic institution is comprehensible only in terms of its history. For well on a thousand years there have been universities in the Western world. During the Middle Ages, the air they breathed was permeated with the doctrines of a universal church; since the Reformation in Protestant countries these have undergone slow and varied metamorphosis. But the essence of the university tradition had remained constant. From the first foundations

> to the present, four main streams have watered the soil on which the universities have flourished. These ultimate sources of strength are: first the cultivation of learning for its own sake; second, the general educational stream of the liberal arts; third, the educational stream that makes possible the professions; and last the never failing river of student life carrying all the power that comes from the gregarious impulses of human beings. All four streams are easily discerned bringing life to the English universities in the first half of the seventeenth century. If one of the four vital streams I have mentioned either fails or swells to a torrent, thus destroying the proper balance of nourishment, then the true university tradition may perish. The cultivation of learning alone produces not a university but a research institute; the sole concern with the student life produces an academic country club or merely a football team maneuvering under a collegiate banner.(p.385)

To paraphrase Dr. Conant's statement, American universities have a tradition, and this tradition is basically Eurocentric. Is it any wonder then that American universities have been very slow at changing or shifting their paradigms to respond to cultural differences? In his book, The Miseducation of the Negroes, Carter Woodson (1933) was skeptical about the kind of African-American such a system might produce. Again, consider the following cases to understand how African-American males have not fully gained from the traditional aims of university education as presented by Conant:

Case #5 An African-American male is a college freshman who was good in both history and the sciences. He was advised by his high school counselor to major in history and not the sciences. When he

took the interest inventory in college, he found that he was more interested in the sciences. He is now majoring in "pre-med" with a grade point average of 3.8 out of 4.0.

Case #6 An African-American male is a wide-receiver for his university's football team. He is now a senior who plans to attend law school. For four years, even though he is one of the top students in his classes, his White peers and professors make implicit racist remarks about African-Americans and sports.

Case #7 In a history class, a White professor exalted the achievements of White Americans in building America. The only African-American in the class asked, "Don't you think African-Americans have helped in building America?" The professor ignored him. A White student remarked very rudely, "Why can't these Blacks go back to where they came from?" Everyone (including the professor) laughed. Again, the professor continued his discussions without responding to the issues.

Case #8 An African-American male was the only minority in his department and college/school. He was treated with disrespect by his White peers and regarded as a desegregation (Affirmative Action) quota by his peers and students. He complained several times, but no one listened. Even though, he was productive, he was discontinued or let go by his university because "he could not get along with others."

From "Band-Aid" to "Real" Solutions

The preceding section demonstrates how tradition conflicts with reality. What one individual may call tradition may constitute real problems for another individual. As we can see, solutions are not as simplistic as easy masquerades. When a group of people is viewed as "poor" and/or "deprived," it demonstrates an inability to confront real problems of real people. We believe that problems confronting African-American males

cannot disappear until we change our thinking (Obiakor, Algozzine and Ford, 1993). We cannot assume that African-American males cannot learn and at the same time expect them to perform academic, social and economic miracles.

The data provided by the AACTE on the fewer number of African-Americans teaching in schools should challenge educators and policy makers. We need to recruit and retain African-American students in teacher preparation programs. However, since we cannot stand still, we have to educate White teachers on how to work with African-American students (Obiakor, 1993a; 1993b). Cases 1-4 demonstrate problems that these students encounter. It is apparent that their problems are also caused by African-Americans who have given up on these students. More than half a century ago, Woodson (1933) examined how an Anglocized system can miseducate African-Americans. In many situations, events and ideas, we have seen many African-Americans who have lost touch with their culture, symbols and beliefs.

At college and university levels, African-American males seem to confront problems comparable to the ones that they encounter at elementary and high school levels. Based on all these problems, some scholars and educators (Barker, 1993; and Parham and McDavis, 1987) have suggested that there might be a conspiracy to endanger the African-American male as a species. No doubt, these

incessant problems magnify the conspiracy theory. For instance, Barker (1993) wrote:

> The peculiarity exists that youth internalize or define others' actions toward them as factual information and interpretations about themselves rather than as social interactions or as explications that may not be valid. Their acceptance of this information is based upon the perceived influence and status of the individual rendering such information. Therefore when the Black child's environment labels him as expendable or superfluous, and then responds to him as such, the internalization of these messages has long lasting and severe consequences. (p. 172)

Mickler (1993), Obiakor (1993b) and Obiakor, Algozzine and Ford (1993) are not conspiratory theorists, however, they agree that teachers and parents have remarkable roles to play to reduce the endemic problems that face African-American males. For example, Mickler pointed out that:

> Teachers can help all students learn that their intellectual and academic abilities are far broader than those tested by traditional assessment techniques and those required to complete the kind of academic tasks that characterize unidimensional classrooms. Educators (and parents) must extensively explore their own personally held views about intelligence and learning and how those views critically influence their classroom decisions. The first step is confrontation with a view of intelligence that limits development of children and contributes to a growing underclass of students who view themselves as stupid and deficient in the characteristics valued by their schools and their society. (p. 140)

Comprehensive Support Model

From the aforementioned problems confronting

African-American males and prescribed solutions, we believe a "Comprehensive Support Model" will be an antidote (See Figure 1). This model is not a panacea for we do not live in an Utopian world. However, as African-American males interact with their families and adjust their perceptions of "self" and as they interact with their schools and preparatory programs for life, they build solid foundations for opportunities and choices. The home has a role to play, the school has a role to play, and the society has a role to play. African-American males need to know that they can go to school and be valued in school. They also need to know that they can maximize their potential, graduate and get jobs. Educators should intrinsically motivate African-American males to begin to engage in purposeful change which could lead to a purposeful life.

With an excellent connection of the support base, African-American males would acknowledge that failure is not the end of the road. This support base must help them to assess and reassess each situation area-specifically so that they do not categorize all their problems as racism. To achieve goals, some objectives (or in this case preparations) are needed. These preparations must be observable, measurable, specific and action-oriented. It is unrealistic to expect an African-American male to succeed in educational programs without an accurate

knowledge of "self," a strong and supportive parent(s) or guardian, a culturally sensitive program and teacher/professor, and an array of opportunities and choices. Based on the formula, ES = F + S + O, there must be interactions between variables. The family must interact with schools, and vice versa. Schools, on the other hand, must prepare the student for life so that he/she can take advantage of opportunities and choices. The Comprehensive Support Model is multidimensional in nature - it should respect intra-individual and inter-individual differences in African-American males. Again, it is not a panacea, it is an antidote.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Perspectives for the 21st Century

Several reports and studies have indicated that relatively few African-American males succeed in the educational mainstream of the United States. Their problems can be attributed to the politics of getting an education. Reform programs have been ineffectual because most programs have been targeted at the symptoms of the problems, rather than the root causes. From all indications, the challenges of African-American males seeking better lives through education will increase, rather than decrease in the 21st. Century. "Band-aid"

approaches will become even less effectual. The situation calls for the "all hands on the deck" approach.

To this end, we prescribe "The Comprehensive Support Model." School success must become the responsibility of all: the student, the family, teachers, administrators and the society at large. This model derives from the theoretical frameworks that define education as complex interactions of ecological and cultural facets of children's development and learning processes. The calls for multicultural and multiethnic education also belong in this tradition. There is need for comprehensive research efforts to explore the multiple variables that contribute to human diversities and learning contexts. Such research should provide guidelines for policies for thorough-going restructuring of curriculum, instruction and assessment as well as social programs that are more supportive of African-Americans and other minorities. Goals that expect all children to come to school "ready to learn" are unrealistic, when all the factors that affect learning are not systematically identified and addressed. Finally, African-Americans males cannot afford to rely only on external quarters for their academic redemption. They too must demonstrate that they are ready and able to face the challenges of getting an education in the 21st century. In the words of late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

The belief that God will do everything for man is as untenable as the belief that man can do everything for himself. It, too, is based on a lack of faith. We must learn that to expect God to do everything while we do nothing is not faith but superstition. (King, 1993, p. 63)

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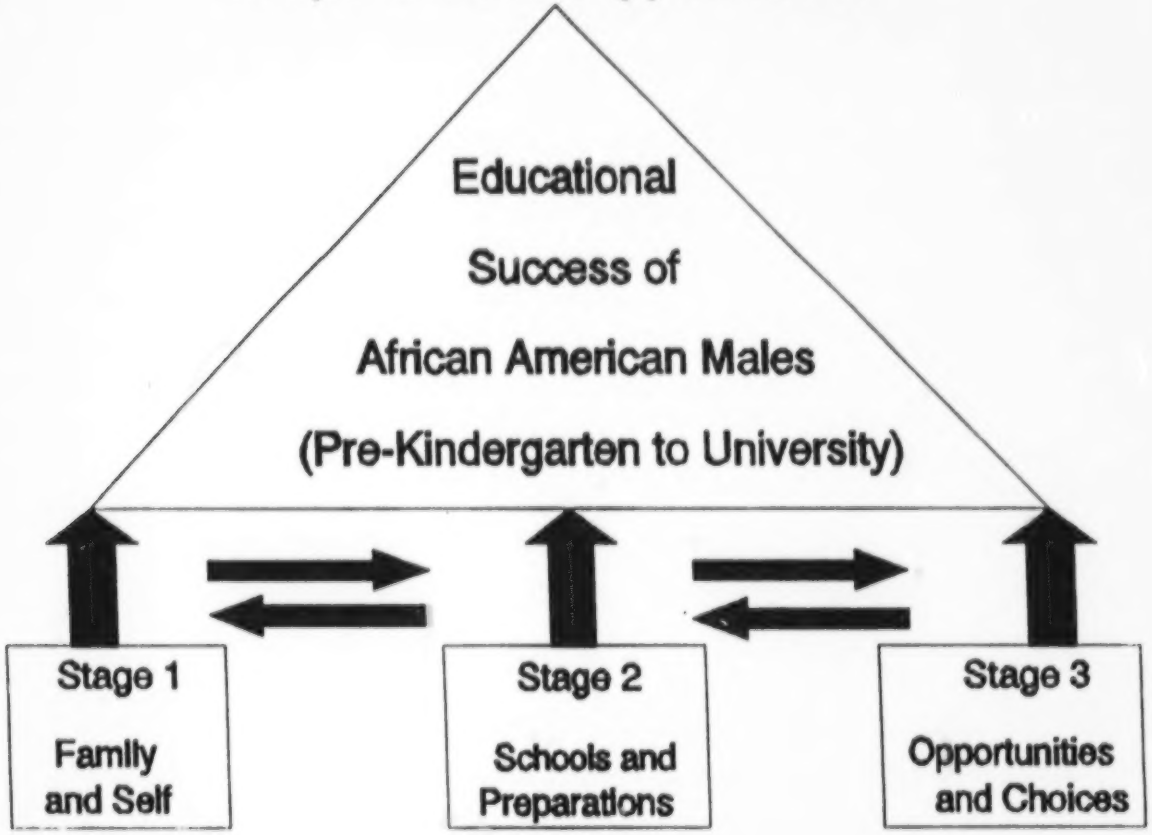
Comprehensive Support Model



Educational Success = Family + Schools + Opportunities

Formula: ES = F + S + O

Figure 1